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ABSTRACT

The willingness of interactants to disclose information about themselves in relationships from which they wish to disengage was compared with their willingness to self-disclose in relationships they wish to maintain. The subjects, 102 college students, were randomly assigned to one of four hypothetical scenarios: one in which the respondent wished to disengage from a relationship but the other person wished to maintain it; one in which both persons wished to disengage from the relationship; one in which both wished to maintain it; and one in which the respondent wished to maintain it and the other person wished to disengage from it. A 20-item questionnaire was then administered to assess respondents' degree of willingness to discuss topics of varying intimacy within the assigned scenarios. Analysis of the results indicated that willingness to self-disclose lessened as the respondent's relational intent shifted from maintenance to disengagement, that willingness to self-disclose did not change significantly with changing perceptions of the other person's relational intent, and that sex differences were not significant. Future research should be devoted to relationship disengagement as well as to the more frequently studied relationship initiation. (The four scenarios and the 20-item questionnaire are included.) (GW)

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SELF-DISCLOSURE AS A RELATIONSHIP DISENGAGEMENT STRATEGY: AN EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION

by

Leslie A. Baxter

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SELF-DISCLOSURE AS A RELATIONSHIP
DISENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

Recent literature in interpersonal communication has posited a model of the human actor as an active force in the interaction process. Whether under the rubric of "communication competency" (Parks, 1977), "language-action" (Frentz & Farrell, 1976), or "rule-governed communication" (Pearce, 1976), these perspectives seek to understand the strategic communicative choices which the actor makes in attaining his/her interaction goals.

When this model of the interactant is juxtaposed against the body of research in interpersonal relationships, it becomes readily apparent that a goal of relationship initiation has received far more attention than a goal of relationship disengagement. Considerable energies have been expended toward understanding the acquaintance process, initial interactions, social penetration, friendship formation, and so forth (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Duck, 1976, 1977). Certainly, the formation of relationships constitutes an important goal in most actors' motivational sets. And if we are to believe futurists such as Toffler (1970), increasing occupational and geographic mobility in the population will increase the frequency with which people are forced to initiate new relationships with others.

However, at times, most actors also have the reverse goal in mind--how to disengage a particular relationship. To presume that actors go through life "stockpiling" an unlimited number of relationships without occasional strategic deletion strikes against common sense. In exchange theory terms, each relationship bears its

own reward and cost dynamics (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Perhaps the most obvious of cost factors is the simple expenditure of time; unless one can "piggyback" relationships for simultaneous interactions, a temporal ceiling exists on the number of one's relationship contacts. Relationship additions, therefore, must to some extent be offset with relationship disengagements elsewhere in the actor's system of relationships. In addition to basic temporal demands, the motivational sets of most actors are dynamic in nature; an actor's goals shift across time. It is but a natural by-product that relationships are in a state of flux to meet these shifting goals. Actors simply grow out of certain relationships which may have been originally initiated in good faith.

In short, it seems important to recognize that actors often seek to disengage relationships as well as to initiate them. Research energies must begin to explore the communicative strategies with which actors accomplish this disengagement goal.

Most published research in the ending process has dealt with encounter endings rather than relationship endings (Albert & Kessler, 1976; Kessler, 1974; Knapp, Hart, Friedrich, & Shulman, 1973). Knapp (1978) posited that the goodbye ritual in encounter endings bears striking resemblance to the relationship disengagement process. Encounter endings are characterized by three elements: 1) summarizing the interaction; 2) signalling decreased accessibility; and 3) signalling ongoing support of the relationship. Certainly, the third element is absent in relationship disengagements. And summarizing a relationship's history for purposes of justifying its end seems appropriate only for disengagements which are handled in an explicit manner, such as those in formalized relationships.

In summary, although the two ending processes may share elements in common, the potential differences justify separate research attention.

To date, two investigations have explored the relationship disengagement process. Shapiro (1977) examined the stability of friendships among children at a summer camp as a function of the attractiveness of the friendship and several demographic characteristics of the children. Hill, Rubin, and Peplau (1976) examined disengagement among romantic relationships prior to marriage. Among other findings, Hill et al. found that few of the relationships could be characterized by a mutual desire to disengage, producing widely discrepant perceptions of the disengagement process between the initiator of the break-up and the person broken up with. Unfortunately, neither of these two investigations offers insight into specific communication strategies employed by the relationship parties.

Although limited research exists on the relationship disengagement process, a substantial amount of theoretical conjecture has been advanced on the subject (Altman & Taylor, 1973; McCall & Simmons, 1966; Zunin & Zunin, 1972; Davis, 1973; Knapp, 1978; Scott & Powers, 1978). Much of this theoretical work addresses the role of self-disclosure in the disengagement process. For the purposes of this study, self-disclosure refers to "any information about himself [herself] which Person A communicates verbally to a Person B" (Cozby, 1973, 73). It is not surprising to see the focus on self-disclosure in disengagement, given the importance of the disclosure variable in the reverse process of relationship development (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Berger, Gardner, Clatterbuck, & Schulman, 1976; Wheeless & Grotz, 1976; Wheeless, 1978; Gilbert &

Whiteneck, 1976; Knapp, 1978). Just as existing research has supported the finding of increased self-disclosure in relationship development, it seems intuitively reasonable to expect reduced self-disclosure in the relationship disengagement process.

Current measurement approaches have demonstrated the multi-dimensionality of the self-disclosure construct (Berger et al., 1976; Wheeless & Grotz, 1976; Gilbert & Whiteneck, 1976). In the context of disengagement, writers have hypothesized as well the multi-dimensional nature of self-disclosure behavior. Altman and Taylor (1973) have discussed both breadth (amount) and depth (intimacy) of self-disclosure in the disengagement process. Davis (1973) has focused on the amount of self-disclosure in addition to several content features of the disclosing behavior: whether the disengager discloses explicitly his/her feelings and intentions about the relationship and the other person; whether relationship expectations and commitments are disclosed; whether one's reliance on the other is disclosed in the requesting of favors. Although not explicitly developed by Davis, these content features appear to tap the intimacy dimension and possibly the valence dimension noted by Wheeless and Grotz (1976) and by Gilbert and Whiteneck (1976). Disclosing one's "here and now" feelings about a relationship is probably a topic of greater depth than one's hobbies and interests. Similarly, one's feelings about a relationship may cast negative or positive comment on the discloser.

This study tests the intuitive reasonableness of reduced self-disclosure in the disengagement process by comparing willingness to self-disclose under conditions of relationship disengagement

versus conditions of relationship maintenance. Self-disclosure is a relational cue of interpersonal accessibility. When desiring to reduce accessibility, it seems reasonable to employ self-disclosure characterized by reduced breadth and depth. Therefore, H_1: A relational intent to disengage will be characterized by less willingness to self-disclose than will an intent to maintain the relationship's degree of closeness.

Because a person does not select communication strategies in an information vacuum relative to the other person in the relationship, a second independent variable was added to the study: perceptions of the other person's relational intentions.

In highly formalized relationships, such as marriage or business partnership, Davis (1973) has hypothesized that the interaction between one's own relationship intentions and the intentions of the other person becomes critical in predicting the explicitness of the self-disclosure. Specifically, in instances where the desire to disengage is not mutual, the disengager will confront the other in a very explicit disclosure of feelings and intentions toward the relationship. However, in less formalized relationships, such as the friendship relationship of this study, one doesn't have to get the other person to agree to the disengagement for it to become operative. The necessity is reduced for open confrontation with full disclosure of one's feelings and intentions toward the relationship, permitting a "fading away" of the relationship through superficial contact. Thus, when the other's desire is to continue the relationship, it is predicted that self-disclosure will be less when one desires to disengage rather than to continue, at least in informal relationships.

When the other's desire is to disengage, the same pattern of self-disclosure is predicted; that is, disclosure will be less

when the respondent desires disengagement rather than continuation. When one wishes to continue the relationship, self-disclosure may be used as a mechanism to increase the reward value of the relationship to the other, thereby persuading him/her to cease the disengagement. Self-disclosure could open up unexplored areas upon which to re-build the relationship. Of course, when one also wishes to disengage, there is no reason to use self-disclosure for this purpose.

The intentions of the other person are hypothesized to have an effect on one's level of self-disclosure, however. When one wishes to maintain the relationship, the level of self-disclosure is expected to be higher when the other also desires to continue rather than to disengage. Although one might use self-disclosures as a mechanism of persuading a wandering Other, an element of caution is also likely to be present in how much one discloses. To openly discuss the state of the relationship provides the other person with an "open door" to terminate the relationship once and for all. It would also be risky to disclose information which the other might be able to use against one; and certainly the risk of such a consequence is greater when the other person no longer desires to continue the relationship.

When one desires to disengage, self-disclosure is expected to be higher under the other's intentions to maintain rather than to disengage. Hill et al. (1976) found that subjects generally felt uncomfortable at the thought of being the "broken up with" rather than the "breaker-upper." When the other is perceived as attempting to control the disengagement outcome, one may intensify one's own disengagement efforts in order to avoid being broken up with.

In brief, a main effect is predicted for Other's Intent:

H_2: When one perceives the other's relational intent as disengagement rather than maintenance, willingness to self-disclose will be less.

DESIGN

A twenty-item Likert-type questionnaire was created to assess the degree of willingness to discuss topics of varying intimacy and valence. Representative items were developed from existing self-disclosure measures (Wheeless & Grotz, 1976; Gilbert & Whiteneck, 1976; Berger et al., 1976). In addition, new items were created to assess the content areas discussed by Davis (1973). Table 1 presents a summary of the twenty topic areas included in the questionnaire. Responses to the questionnaire (N = 102) were submitted to a factor analysis program with the following options: squared multiple correlation communalities with oblique rotation of factors for latent roots ≥ 1.00. Three factors emerged, accounting for a total of 80.6% of the total variance. Table 1 presents the item loadings. Items having a primary loading $\geq .55$ with no secondary loading $\geq .40$ were used to interpret factors.

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Table 1 about here

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Employing the procedures for reliability estimation advanced by Nunnally (1967), the reliability coefficients were .82 for factor 1, .76 for factor 2, and .75 for factor 3. The intercorrelations among factors were as follows: .54 between factors 1 and 2; -.24 between factors 1 and 3; and -.37 between factors 2 and 3.

The 102 respondents were drawn from introductory communications

classes at a private college; participation was voluntary. Data were collected during spring and summer terms of 1977.

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of four hypothetical scenarios: Respondent intent to maintain-Other intent to maintain; Respondent intent to maintain-Other intent to disengage; Respondent intent to disengage-Other intent to maintain; and Respondent intent to disengage-Other intent to disengage.[1] Harré and Secord (1972) have provided a cogent rationale for using scenarios such as these in studying human behavior. Given a model of the person as a self-directing agent who strategically acts out role performances, it is entirely consistent to use methods which involve "make-believe and theatrical procedures" such as imagining how to behave in a particular circumstance. As Harré and Secord (1972, 316) argued, ". . . imagination is certainly a vital part of life. There is reason to think that rehearsal in the imagination may be the most central feature of all, when we ask how and why any particular piece of behaviour is manifested."

Information on respondent sex was also collected in order to incorporate the sex variable into the statistical analysis (36 males and 66 females). In newly-developing relationships, the self-disclosure literature has produced equivocal findings with regard to sex differences (Hancock, 1976; Gilbert & Whiteneck, 1976). Thus, although a sex hypothesis was not advanced, the design did not preclude a sex difference emerging in the data.

RESULTS

From Table 1, it is apparent that factor 1 items appear to reflect self-disclosure high in intimacy and immediacy ("here and now") value. Factor 2 consists of "up-dating" self-disclosure

information. Factor 3 appears lowest in intimacy level, containi information related to broad interests and opinions.

Each respondent had three self-disclosure scores, consisting of the average of the scores for items representing that particular factor.[2] To create an equal-cell design, 30Ss were randomly eliminated from the larger-sized cells, producing a final computational N of 72. A 2 X 2 X 2 MANOVA was employed, producing the following results: no significant three-way interaction (Wilk's lambda = .97; Rao's F = .59; 3, 62df); an insignificant interaction of Respondent Intent and Other's Intent (Wilk's lambda = .99; Rao's F = .10; 3, 62df); and insignificant interaction of Sex and Other's Intent (Wilk's lambda =.99; Rao's F = .13; 3, 62df); an insignificant interaction of Sex with Respondent Intent (Wilk's lambda = .92; Rao's F = 1.90; 3, 62df); no significant main effect for Sex of Respondent (Wilk's lambda = .98, Rao's F = .31; 3, 62df); no significant main effect for Other's Intent (Wilk's lambda = .98, Rao's F = .48; 3, 62df). However, a significant main effect was found for Respondent's Intent (Wilk's lambda = .86, Rao's F = 3.47; 3, 62df; $p < .05$).

Wilkinson (1975) has provided a strong argument for the use of multiple statistical perspectives in analyzing significant MANOVA effects. To gain some insight into the source of the significance for Respondent Intent, a discriminant analysis was first performed. Table 2 presents a summary of the means for both Respondent Intent groups. Table 3 summarizes the standardized canonical coefficients and the canonical component loadings for each of the original dependent variables. Although the canonical correlation of .37

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Tables 2 and 3 about here

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accounted for approximately 14% of the variance, an examination of the component loadings indicates that the original dependent variables did not contribute equally to the discriminant function. Factor 1, characterized by a direct confrontation and discussion on the state of the relationship, appears to predominate the function.

Roy-Bose simultaneous confidence intervals were computed next for supplementary analysis purposes. The absence of a zero value in the confidence interval for factor 1 indicates significance at the .05 level between the maintain and the disengage conditions (upper and lower bounds of -.062 and -1.048, respectively). However, no significant differences emerged for factors 2 and 3 (upper and lower bounds of .068 and -.939 for factor 2 and .163 and -.760 for factor 3).

Finally, univariate F-ratios were computed for each original dependent variable; these values are summarized in Table 3. Only factor 3 failed to reach statistical significance at the .05 level.

Relative to the hypotheses, the first seems to have been confirmed; willingness to self-disclose lessened in intimacy as the relational intent shifted from relationship maintenance to relationship disengagement. The largest contributor to this effect was factor 1, which contains the topics highest in intimacy value. The second hypothesis was not confirmed; the willingness to self-disclose did not change significantly with changing perceptions of the Other's relational intent. Finally, no sex difference emerged in the data.

DISCUSSION

Based on the findings of this study, a disengager will likely avoid a direct confrontation and discussion regarding the state of

the relationship; three of the five items loading on factor 1 dealt with willingness to engage in open disengagement tactics. Factor 1 clearly dominated the discriminant function in the significant Respondent Intent effect. If considered alone in a univariate model, 10% of the variance is accounted for by factor 1.

Most of the statistical indicators--the standardized coefficients, the canonical loadings, the magnitudes of the univariate F-ratios--agreed in their rankings of the dependent factors relative to the strength of the treatment effect. Although the Roy-Bose simultaneous confidence intervals found significant difference on factor 1, no significance was found on factor 2. Certainly, factor 2 contributed substantially less to the discriminant function than did factor 1, but its lack of statistical significance may also reflect the conservatism of the Roy-Bose technique (Hummel & Sligo, 1971; Wilkinson, 1975). Consistently, factor 3--superficial self-disclosure--ranked a distant third in its contribution to the significant canonical variate.

The bias against open self-disclosure of one's disengagement intentions confirms the findings of Baxter (1978) in which 72% of the strategies which respondents reported using in actual friendship disengagements were non-direct. Disengagers may hint at their desire to disengage by conversing only on superficial topics, hoping the Other is socially perceptive.

The fact that self-disclosure differences only accounted for approximately 14% of the variance perhaps suggests that changes in self-disclosure play a relatively minor role in one's total repertoire of disengagement strategies. In self-reports of actual disengagements, Baxter (1978) found that several other verbal and nonverbal strategies were reported more frequently than were shifts

in self-disclosure, especially shifts in the frequency of initiating contact with the other person.

The failure to find a significant sex effect is not inconsistent with the mixed findings regarding sex differences in self-disclosing behavior during relationship development. Clearly, however, additional research is warranted, especially considering that only a male target Other was used in the scenarios. The failure to find a sex difference may also reflect an insufficient statistical power due to the relatively small cell sizes of the MANOVA test.

The Other's relational intent did not produce significant differences in self-disclosure behavior. Certainly, as with the sex variable, statistical power may be responsible. Alternatively, perhaps awareness of the Other's intent calls upon different interaction strategies in one's repertoire besides self-disclosure manipulations. For example, in the mutual desire to disengage, both may simply exhibit less careful listening behavior rather than alter the level of self-disclosure. When only one party desires disengagement, the member wishing to continue could rely on such tactics as favor-doing in order to persuade the other person to continue. Contrary to the reasoning presented above, the person desiring to keep the other in the relationship may maintain high levels of self-disclosure as a means of cueing the other that the desire is not mutual, thereby making the disengagement too costly for the other to implement. Additional research is needed, however, to test these conjectures.

Although Harré and Secord (1972) have supported the scenario method, they have also argued that it should not become a substitute

for other methodologies. It would be useful for respondents to report how they have disengaged with others, as well as how others have disengaged with them, under relationship conditions similar to those represented in the scenarios. Further, understanding of the disengagement process could be enhanced with the consideration of additional variables of relevance: Davis' (1973) distinction between formalized and informal relationships; the duration of the relationship prior to disengagement; the type of relationship at the time of disengagement (acquaintanceship, close friendship, romantic involvement, etc.); the expectations of the parties regarding the post-disengagement relationship state. Disengagement strategies in addition to self-disclosure deserve research attention, as well. If interpersonal relationships are to be understood in a meaningful manner, research energies should consider endings as well as the more popular beginnings.

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NOTES

1. The 4 scenarios are given below. Following a given scenario, respondents were given the following instructions on the questionnaire: "What things would you talk about with the other person? In the context of this hypothetical scenario, respond to the following 20 items. Circle a '1' if you STRONGLY AGREE with the statement; circle a '5' if you STRONGLY DISAGREE with the statement; circle an intermediate number which reflects an intermediate degree of agreement or disagreement."

   MUTUAL DESIRE TO MAINTAIN:

   You are in the crowded lunchroom looking for a place to sit while you eat. About the only available seat is next to Patrick, someone with whom you recently worked on a group project. You were pretty good friends with one another during the project work, and you would like to maintain the friendship at its prior level of closeness. You have reason to believe that Patrick feels the same way. Because of the available seat, you go over and sit down by Patrick, striking up a conversation.

   RESPONDENT DESIRE TO MAINTAIN-OTHER INTENT TO DISENGAGE:

   You are in the crowded lunchroom looking for a place to sit while you eat. About the only available seat is next to Patrick, someone with whom you recently worked on a group project. You were pretty good friends with one another during the project work, and you would like to maintain the friendship at its prior level of closeness. However, you have reason to

believe that Patrick doesn't really want to continue the friendship at the same level. Because of the available seat, you go over and sit down by Patrick, striking up a conversation.

RESPONDENT DESIRE TO DISENGAGE-OTHER INTENT TO MAINTAIN:

You are in the crowded lunchroom looking for a place to sit while you eat. About the only available seat is next to Patrick, someone with whom you recently worked on a group project. You were pretty good friends with one another during the project work, but now, in re-assessing things, you really don't want to maintain the friendship at its prior level of closeness. You have reason to believe, however, that Patrick wishes to maintain the friendship as it existed. Because of the available seat, you go over and sit down by Patrick, striking up a conversation.

MUTUAL DESIRE TO DISENGAGE:

You are in the crowded lunchroom looking for a place to sit while you eat. About the only available seat is next to Patrick, someone with whom you recently worked on a group project. You were pretty good friends with one another during the project work, but now, in re-assessing things, you really don't want to maintain the friendship at its prior level of closeness. You have reason to believe that Patrick feels the same way. Because of the available seat, you go over and sit down by Patrick, striking up a conversation.

2. In addition, factor scores from all items were input into a MANOVA analysis in order to determine if the derived average scores would result in different findings. The results were the same as those reported in the text of the paper.

TABLE 1

Factor Loadings for Questionnaire Items

Questionnaire Items	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
1. Intimate, personal things about myself	-.38	-.35	-.27
2. Positive things about myself	.03	-.27	.30
3. Things about myself that I don't like	-.20	-.27	-.04
4. My hobbies and interests	.14	-.30	.69
5. Things unrelated to myself	.34	.15	-.17
6. Social issues	-.20	.35	.56
7. Personal problems I was experiencing at the time	-.69	-.04	-.28
8. My perceptions of Patrick	-.86	.27	-.02
9. My future school or career plans	.02	-.24	.65
10. My friendship with Patrick	-.80	.13	.14
11. Things about persons who are known to us both	.12	-.57	-.01
12. Past experiences common to both of us	.19	-.49	.28
13. The specifics of scheduling when and where we were to meet again	-.45	-.29	.09
14. Asking for a moderate favor	-.60	-.02	.06
15. Things that have happened in my life since our last meeting	.07	-.85	-.02
16. Things that have happened in Patrick's life since our last meeting	.04	-.85	-.03
17. Things unrelated to Patrick	.24	.29	-.12
18. Any personal problems Patrick was experiencing at the time	-.32	-.41	.13
19. My attitudes & beliefs on current events	-.05	.27	.69
20. Where my relationship with Patrick currently stands	-.73	-.02	.01
Cumulative % Variance Accounted For	50.6	69.0	80.6

TABLE 2

Group Means for Respondent Intent to Maintain or Disengage

Dependent Variables	Respondent Intent	
	Intent to Maintain	Intent to Disengage
Factor 1	3.24	3.80
Factor 2	2.22	2.66
Factor 3	1.78	2.08
Canonical Mean	.41	-.39

Note. - Raw scores ranged from 1-5, with larger values indicative of unwillingness to discuss that topic.

TABLE 3

Standardized Canonical Coefficients, Canonical Component Loadings, and Univariate F-ratios

Dependent Variables	Standardized Canonical Coefficients	Canonical Component Loadings	Univariate F-ratios
Factor 1	-.74	-.84	7.41
Factor 2	-.42	-.66	4.43
Factor 3	-.33	-.50	2.42